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AUTHOR Duncan, Patricia H.; Goggin, William F.
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ABSTRACT

As the number of older adults in the United States increases, more must be understood about their reading behaviors so that adequate services might be provided for them. In addition, carefully documented reading behaviors might yield valuable clues to the early establishment of lifelong reading habits. With these goals in view, a study investigated the reading habits and interests of retired adults who were active lifelong readers. Twenty-one adults with various educational levels were interviewed in the study. The following characteristics emerged from the interviews and appeared to be consistent across the range of educational levels: (1) active retired adult readers started reading early in life with the support and guidance of family members; (2) good readers were aware of literary resources and continued to enjoy similar types of reading materials throughout their lives; (3) the adult readers added new types as environmental influences changed and discarded other types of materials when they were no longer relevant; (4) for these people, reading was personal and most were content with a minimum of social interaction related to reading; (5) as a group, these people were articulate, alert, and mentally active; and (6) the readers maintained a sense of humor and had other interests to complement their reading. (FL)

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Reading Habits, Patterns, and Interests of Older Active Readers

Patricia H. Duncan
Virginia Commonwealth University

and

William F. Goggin
Virginia Commonwealth University

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William F. Goggin

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Reading Habits, Patterns, and Interests of Older Active Readers

The study of older readers is important for several reasons. As the population of the United States continues to increase at upper age ranges more must be understood about aging readers so that adequate services might be provided. From another perspective, historically documented reading phenomena may yield valuable clues for early encouragement of lifetime reading habits for youth.

Current research on the reading of the elderly yields little conclusive evidence concerning life-long reading (MacLean & MacLean, 1979). General surveys and literature reviews (Moshey, 1972; Sharon, 1974; Harvey, 1979) report a lessening of reading time at upper age levels, a preference by good readers for newspapers and magazines, poetry, history, historical novels, biographies, and travel books. Watson and her associates (1979) and Harvey and Dutton (1979) observe that novels with sex and violence and science fiction are not preferred reading by retired citizens. Less well-educated individuals are judged to be reluctant readers.

Purpose of the Study

With few exceptions, the research on older readers has been conducted using populations which include habitual readers as well as those who do not or cannot read. It is the intent of this study to focus exclusively on the habits and behaviors of individuals in their retirement years who are active lifetime readers. Although the observations from this study cannot be generalized to a broad population, they present a more clearly delineated profile of the active reader in retirement.

Related Research

Noteworthy investigations of older readers present some insights into reading as a process for older readers. By analyzing the reading miscues of older readers, Watson et al. (1979) and De Santi (1976) imply that active readers process in large linguistic units and that the push for meaning is a processing strength. Although oral reading is unnatural to most good adult readers, the miscue analysis approach offers opportunity for direct behavioral observation.

To discover whether or not the purposes for reading have a life span perspecitive, Wolf surveyed 249 retired persons in Kent County, Michigan. Using an 18-item questionnaire and taped group interviews, he discovered that older readers read to fulfill needs beyond functional literacy and that reading provides coping mechanisms pertinent to the problems of aging. Ngandu and O'Rourke (1979) asked 267 older citizens to complete a questionnaire concerning reading and other behaviors. Their results suggested that reading was done for enjoyment and information. Time spent in reading was equivalent to time watching television.

Similar conclusions were drawn by Ribovich and Erikson (1980) following home interviews with 30 randomly-selected subjects who were members of the American Association of Retired Persons. Of the group interviewed, most read for enjoyment and to "keep current." Television was cited as a major source of news with newspapers a distant second source. Problems which were identified as interfering with reading include visual constraints (20%) and fatigue. Early family influences suggested that good readers were generated from school-oriented families with a mother or grandmother who read to the children. For Ribovich's and Erikson's subjects, the amount of reading increased from middle to older ages.

These investigations provide important insights into the behaviors of older readers. The study presented in this paper attempts to describe more completely behaviors of good older readers. It further attempts to utilize the reading autobiography recommended by Ngandu and O'Rourke (1976) as a method of investigation which ". . .might help isolate particular variables which seem consistent among these older citizens."

Subjects

The subjects for the present phase of this investigation were 21 retired citizens currently living in Virginia and Pennsylvania who ranged in age from 70 to 95. They presently live in private homes or apartments, a residential hotel, a private retirement complex, and a church-affiliated retirement complex. The sample included 17 women and 4 men; a more skewed distribution than the 70:30 ratio reported by the Harris Survey (1975) conducted for the National Council on the Aging. Twenty of the subjects were white; one was black. They were individuals who identified themselves as active readers and who agreed, upon request, to participate in an in-depth taped interview conducted by the investigators.

Developmental Characteristics of Active Retired Readers

Demographic data gleaned from the interviews revealed the following information about the subjects:

1. They were born in the southeastern, northeastern, or midwestern regions of the United States. One individual was Canadian.

2. They were from families ranging from only-child status to seven siblings. None of the subjects who were parents had more than three children -- the majority (42%) had two children.

3. They include six single, three married, one divorced, and nine widowed individuals.

4. An anlysis of the highest education level attained by the subjects would refute the observations in previous studies that education is a factor in good reading. The present sample included the following distribution:

Highest Education Level:

grammar school (8th-10th)	- 4
high school	- 6
Bachelor's degree	- 6
Master's degree	- 6

Ten of the subjects indicated evidence of continuing education, both formal and informal, beyond the highest level of education attained.

5. Career experiences for these individuals covered a wide range of occupations over a life span. More frequently occuring occupations included teaching, homemaking, military service as a civilian or officer, library work and clerical work. Unique careers mentioned were children's theater director, fashion model, and newspaper feature writer. Professional affiliation with organizations appeared to have been generally discontinued, although four women were still active in the American Association of University Women.

6. Current memberships in social and religious groups ranged widely, and, in some instances, paralleled hobbies and interests other than reading. Frequently mentioned social membershios included church groups (10), women's clubs (6), historical societies (3), and fine arts societies and organizations (10). Only three individuals reported membership in organizations designed for retired persons.

7. Avocations in addition to reading included 24 types of activities. Interest in the theater, music, handiwork, and travel were most frequently reported.

8. Of the 21 subjects, 13 stated that they were in good health. A number (17) of typical health problems were identified with visual problems, arthritis and hypertension reported most frequently. The interaction of physical factors and reading is addressed in subsequent discussions.

Method

Each subject was interviewed for 60 to 90 minutes at his/her residence at a time convenient to the interviewee. Subjects were given an explanation of the project and were informed that the taped interviews would remain anonymous. An interview guide prepared by the investigators included questions designed to elicit elaborated responses concerning reading habits, reading interests, and the impact of environmental and physical factors on reading. The guide was preceded by a case history survey also conducted orally. Interviews were taped for greater accuracy of data gathering. The taping also provided an analysis of the nuances and affect coloring an individual's response, increasing the opportunities to analyze the behavioral patterns described.

Information obtained from the interviews was categorized by recording behaviors from written notations and taped interviews.

Observations

Developmental History of Reading Behavior

Typically, the active older reader in this study recalled an early interest in literature. Three of the subjects reported having learned to read before entering

school. Few individuals could remember the exact method for learning to read, but most experienced early the joy in reading that one octogenarian's remarks illustrate: "I remember that I was so happy when I got to school and learned to read and write all by myself." Specific early reading impressions recalled included learning by the "whole word" method, rapid reading of adventure stories, and time spent in the free reading corners of the classroom.

As might be expected, the mother was influential in early reading development as a model and as the person who most frequently read to the child. Individuals who were reported as singularly influential in guiding early reading were mother (57%) and father (33%). Others mentioned were private tutor, teacher, neighbor, aunt, and sister. Motivating environmental factors during the early years of reading included the presence of home libraries (29%), family read-together times (29%), early exposure to the public library (23%), and books received as gifts.

Favorite childhood books remembered represented a wide range of types with fairy tales, adventure and series books being among the most popular. Classics, such as Treasure Island, Alice in Wonderland, Lamb's Tales of Shakespeare, Robinson Crusoe, and Little Women were noted. One woman indicated that her family could only afford to buy the very best literature; therefore, she had read few children's books. She had, however, read Dicken's Tale of Two Cities and Hugo's Les Miserables by the time she was twelve.

During the adolescent years, the subjects described patterns which incorporated the reading of the "forbidden" books from which they learned about human sexuality. Such stories as The Sheik and The Flaming Youth were read with guilty excitement. Growing adult interests were illustrated by

the reading of the works of Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Dickens, Poe, Hugo, and D. H. Lawrence. History and historical fiction endured as popular types of reading.

Patterns of reading in the middle years were characterized by the same types as are found in current reading by 38% of the subjects. Readers enjoyed more contemporary fiction, more interest in travel, more romantic novels and more career-related materials.

Mothers reported the beginning of late-night reading habits (after the children were in bed) which appeared to persist into retirement years. Regular use of the library had been established and continued to be an important part of the adult reading routine.

Several fascinating patterns were described which depicted the avid reader. One clerical worker mentioned reading on the bus to and from work. A teacher/mother indicated that she usually had two books going at the same time -- one professional and one for pleasure reading. Three women suggested going on "reading orgies," forsaking food and sleep and putting housework aside to read intensely for long periods of time. The social status of reading was illustrated by the comment of one woman who said, "I went through a real snotty period, thinking I couldn't read anything that wouldn't benefit me intellectually." A scientist recalled that his pace slowed during the college and career years when he was reading detailed information and wished to avoid re-reading. He traced this behavior to his current inability to change reading pace to adjust to different types of materials.

The behaviors recalled seemed to reflect readers who sustained continued interests which began early and expanded throughout adulthood. The influence of

one's career or work experiences was judged to be significant by 62% of the subjects. As one woman said, "Everything led to the library." Conversely, it might be suggested that interest in reading may have predisposed some individuals to select their particular careers or to choose certain avocations.

Observations of Current Reading

Routine:

Daily reading was reported by all but the one subject who is now blind. He has readers for four hours weekly and reads five to six of the "Talking Books" (Virginia Commission for the Blind) every two weeks. Of the 21 subjects, eight said that they read anytime they can; however, particular patterns were observed. Early morning newspaper reading is favored by 10 (48%) of the group. Bedtime is the second favorite time for reading, enjoyed by nine (43%) of the group. Late-night reading seemed popular for five women (24%). Habits carried over from child rearing years and coping with the pain of arthritis seem to contribute to the establishment of the late-night routine.

Kinds of Reading Materials:

Consistent with survey findings reported by Moshey (1972), Sharon (1973-74), and Ngandu and O'Rourke (1979), the newspaper was one of the most popular reading materials. Twenty subjects read the newspaper daily with 14 (67%) preferring the morning paper. Other newspapers read routinely by eight individuals included the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Richmond Afro-American. Magazines were regularly read by 16 (76%) of the subjects; however, only nine (42%) reported subscribing to magazines.

A consistent pattern of preference for fiction or non-fiction was not in evidence for the group interviewed. Seven (33%) of the subjects stated a pre-

ference for fiction, while eight (38%) preferred non-fiction.

Categories of literature read frequently included the following designated ones along with the percentage of people selecting them:

Fiction

Category	Number	Percent
historical novel	9	43
best sellers	9	43
mystery/suspense	9	43
romance	8	38
poetry	6	28
adventure	2	9
Bible	2	9
mythology	2	9
plays	2	9
children's classics	2	9
political intrigue	1	4

Condensed versions of novels were read by three individuals. Three individuals reported that they enjoyed reading "trash," which appeared to be light fiction and romance.

Non-Fiction

Category	Number	Percent
biography/autobiography	16	76
history	12	57
religious/inspirational	5	23
travel	3	14

Non-Fiction

Category	Number	Percent
political science	3	14
current affairs	3	14
fine arts	3	14
military history	2	9
health/how-to books	2	9
cookbooks	1	4

The preferred categories selected by the subjects in this study correspond closely to those reported by Moshey (1979) and Ribovich and Erikson (1980, who found that lifetime readers tend to enjoy biography, history, historical fiction, and mystery.

A phenomenon reported in this study which has not been discussed in other studies is that of re-reading. Nine of the 21 subjects reported that they frequently re-read material that they have previously read, sometimes as often as five or six times. Re-read materials were usually books which have been childhood favorites, Shakespeare's plays or works of preferred authors. The re-reading phenomenon did not appear to be a function of lack of material; rather it seemed to be a desire to recapture a mood established as the reader interacts with the text.

Interest and taste in magazines or journals range widely for this group of readers. Currently the 21 subjects reported reading 35 different magazines and one professional journal. Avocational interests appeared to control selection in magazine reading. The most popular magazine choices were categorized as women's/homemaking (61%), news/political (48%), and Reader's Digest (38%).

Access to Books and Other Reading Materials:

As a whole, the subjects expressed minimal concern with access to materials. They knew how and where to get the types of materials they wanted to read. It was also noted that they kept in their living quarters selections of newspapers and current magazines, a book or two currently being read, and small collections of well-bound keepsakes. Few of the subjects had room for extensive libraries in their present living arrangements; consequently, books were in continuous flow from library to reader or from reader to a friend or relative. Because of this continuous flow, a trend in access did not emerge. Bookmobile users were exchanging selections on a two- week basis.

The most common sources for reading materials for the subjects were the public library (71%), direct purchase of hardback and paperback books (71%), friends and relatives (43%), and residential libraries (33%). Other sources mentioned less frequently were gifts, social club libraries, church libraries, and state library. Book club subscriptions represented a rather insignificant access mode for these retired readers. Two valuable resources for blind and partially sighted persons were used by the one blind man and a visually impaired woman. The Talking Books, sponsored by the Virginia Commission for the Blind, and the Virginia Voice for the Print Handicapped, were considered excellent alternative ways of enjoying literature, poetry, news, and feature topics. The former involves recorded literature, while the latter offers special radio broadcasting of current news, features, and literature.

For the subjects in this study, cost was not a factor in access to reading materials. Five people mentioned that cost did affect the purchase of books; however, three of the four understood price in the context of increased publishing costs. Paperback books were seen by some as a great contribution to readers.

Sharing Reading:

In describing a model reading program for nursing home residents, Gentile and McMillan (1979) recommended twice weekly discussion groups and volunteers to assist reading. They further suggested that literary experiences be directed toward developing self-worth, and physical and mental well-being. Lovelace (1979) and Wilson (1979) designed activities to enhance the lives of older citizens in a nursing home and retirement center. Both suggested that sharing reading appeared to be more social than intellectual and that highly-structured group activities were rejected by their subjects. The present survey of active retired readers supports the conclusions of Lovelace and Wilson.

Books were shared by the subjects in a fairly intimate manner, primarily with friends (67%) or relatives (57%). Four individuals participated in a monthly reading group, although interest in reading groups in general was not strong. A common view expressed was that it was difficult to find someone with exactly the same interests and tastes.

Physical Factors Influencing Reading Habits:

Serious visual problems were the most frequent deterrents to reading and included such debilitating conditions as cataracts, glaucoma, severe deterioration, and total blindness. Other chronic visual problems reported were dissatisfaction with small print, eye fatigue, and need for more light. Sloane and Kraut (1975) have emphasized the need of older citizens for increased reading light citing the miosis of pupil growth and the yellowing of the chrystalline lens as aging progresses. Compensatory behaviors to accommodate vision reduction included the use of magnifying glasses, large print materials, audio materials, and skimming and scanning techniques in addition to the use of reading glasses.

Four subjects observed that their reading pace was getting slower and that they tired more easily. Three women complained that it was difficult to read "big heavy books" which were uncomfortable to hold. Arthritis appeared to have mixed influences on reading habits. Two subjects remarked that it was difficult to walk to the library because of an arthritis condition; while two women felt that reading helped them to pass the time and to cope with the pain experienced with this ailment.

Purposes and Values of Reading:

The purposes for reading for an older active reader do not appear to differ from adult readers in general. Eleven subjects in this study stated that they read primarily for pleasure and entertainment. Thirteen readers cited informational motivations for reading. Two questions were asked of the subjects concerning values in reading: (1) What makes a book good for you? and (2) What is it about reading that has enabled you to sustain interest in it?

Responses to the first question include appreciation of writing style (38%), an engrossing subject or topic (48%), and well-developed characters (14%). Two people mentioned action as an important ingredient in a good book. Four readers indicated that the physical properties of books, such as paper quality, binding and print size also contributed to their enjoyment of a book.

The question of reading as a sustained pastime elicited the most emotional responses, which were difficult to classify specifically. Vicarious experiences through books was illustrated by comments such as, "I play all the leading characters" and "It takes me into another world." Companionship and need fulfillment motivations were expressed in statements such as, "It's a friend" and "I can be my myself and feed my own needs." Curiosity about human behavior was suggested in the following comments: "It's the best way to relate to human experience"; "I am interested in people and what they have done." Other values

expressed suggested that some life-long readers are curious about scientific phenomena and the human condition throughout history. Several subjects felt that one was born with the tendency to be a reader - - "It's in your blood."

Summary

Although conclusions about older active readers based upon this study are tentative until validated by a larger sample, several characteristics appear to be quite consistent across a range of educational levels:

- Active readers in retirement started reading early under the support and guidance of family.
- Good readers are aware of literary resources and continue to enjoy preferred types of materials.
- They add new types as environmental influences change and discard other types of materials which no longer have relevancy for them.
- Reading for these people is personal and most are quite content with a minimum of social interaction related to their reading.
- As a group, these readers were articulate, alert, and mentally active.
- They maintained a sense of humor and had other interests to compliment reading.

Kingston (1981) was correct to question those gerontologists who feel that active participation in social groups is a better predictor of adjustment than the more solitary activity of reading. For the readers in this study, reading appeared to be a concommitant of good adjustment and good mental health.

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